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ABSTRACT

Suggestions are presented for being successful in publishing research results and for disseminating results once they are published. Writing style is the single most important ingredient for success in publishing, and revision is the usual prerequisite for style. Selecting target journals before writing can maximize the manuscript's chances of success. Writing query letters before submitting a manuscript is not very useful, unless the author is aiming for a theme issue that may be filled. Reading author guidelines is a more useful approach. Attending to details such as checking citations is an important step. In general, an author can believe an editor's comments and suggestions, except in the area of lag time or manuscript review. The author should not overpersonalize editorial contacts, and should focus on the revision requests of the editor. In submitting a revision, it is usually helpful to enumerate the corrections made. Changes should be made before galley proofs arrive. Once a work is in print, the author should promote it, sending out reprint copies, for example. (SLD)

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Publishing Your Research Results:

Some Thoughts and Suggestions from an Author Who is Also an Editor

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ABSTRACT

Success in publishing research results can determine whether professionals get or retain jobs, and also impacts what knowledge is or is not disseminated and thus available within the literature. This paper presents suggestions for being successful in publishing research results, and also explores strategies for disseminating results once they are published.

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Publishing Your Research Results: Some Thoughts and Suggestions from an Author Who is Also an Editor

Many young scholars imbue the publication process with qualities involving mystical wisdom. Some find the prospect of potential rejection intimidating, for if the process yields infallibly wise decisions, then rejection can only imply correctly perceived defects in manuscript authors.

It is true that the use of blind review mechanisms is indicative of efforts to make the editorial review process objective, but the process can at times be more fallible than wise (Peters & Ceci, 1982). Persons first initiating publication efforts need to keep this realization in mind. Editors, in addition to be tired, are also imperfect, so are the referees they select, and so occasionally are editorial decisions.

The most productive scholars are (sometimes) distinguished by extraordinary intellect, but some are primarily distinguished by a willingness to be very systematic and persistent. Success in publishing requires a willingness to tolerate rejection, and a willingness to learn from it. Success also will sometimes turn primarily upon luck.

However, success in publishing is art as well as science. In addition to cultivating intellect, ego strength, organization, luck, and especially persistence, authors need to develop

intuitions about what works and what doesn't. There is no substitute for experience in developing these instincts. That's one reason why it's helpful to begin efforts to publish early in professional life, so that the initial stumbles that may accompany first efforts will be well out of the way prior to job searches and tenure reviews. Some of the following thoughts may be helpful in developing good instincts about publishing.

1. Writing Quality Is Critical

Successful writing for scholarly publication is extremely time-consuming. Rejection rates at most journals are extraordinary, and some editors find themselves forced to reject perfectly good manuscripts simply because they don't have space in journal signatures for all the good pieces they get. The combination of the demands upon many professionals to write for publication and the odds against success suggests that you should do everything you can to maximize your chances. Avoid any weak links in the chain of steps you must follow from initially conceptualizing a project through finally submitting revised manuscripts and proofing galley copy. Given that the minimum effort you have to invest to be at all credible is so large, it only makes sense to do everything you can to make your manuscripts the best that they can be.

The single ingredient most critical to success in publishing is **writing style**. I am convinced that poor writing will doom even the most significant manuscript (truthfully reporting the impending end of the world, viable cold fusion, etc.) to rejection, while

even a trivial report has a reasonable chance of being published somewhere, if the manuscript is well written. Spend whatever time it takes to communicate economically and with probity of style.

For most of us this means that we have to revise through several drafts. I do know one very prominent scholar who never rewrites or revises anything, period. This works for him. But writing without thoughtfully revising to improve the writing as much as possible simply will not work for most us (even the scholar who as an exception highlights the general rule would have better things in print if he revised). Refusing to spend the necessary time to revise on the front end only serves to expedite faster turn around on getting rejection letters back in the mail. If you have colleagues perverse enough to read and comment on your work without demanding co-authorship, take them up on the open-season invitation to be abusive (or offer to exchange such services with them).

Do not assume that the editorial staff will do everything they can to whip your manuscript into shape. Sometimes they will. But they may decide that the manuscript isn't worth the effort. Once you knock on the door with a particular piece, if the initial submission was badly written, even a total revision that works miracles may confront a prejudice created by the original submission. Knock on the door at a given journal with your work in the best shape it can be, because you may not get a real second chance with that particular work.

2. <u>Select Target Journals Before Writing</u>

Spend some time **before** you write picking your target journals

for a given project. Rank order two or three as the outlets you select. You need to try to write for specific journals. Editors and reviewers look very carefully at the fit between a manuscript and a given journal. Some reviewers feel they don't have to spend time reading manuscripts if they can instead make a case that the manuscript simply belongs in some other journal. Minimize this by submitting manuscripts to journals where there is a reasonable fit, and target before you write so that the style and the approach you use in your writing maximizes the fit.

Selecting target journals will require some homework. Read through recent issues to see what the journal's focus seems to be. Of course, you have to remember that publication lag times mean that you won't immediately see changes that have already occurred but that are not yet reflect in the in-print copy of the journal. Still, you have to do the best you can.

Most journals publish guidelines for authors either in every issue or periodically. Read them carefully; believe the things they say. Some journals also include editorials--read these too, if they shed light on editorial policy or thinking.

It is surprising that a substantial number of authors do not investigate author guidelines prior to submission. The most surprising example (regrettably, not as exceptional as it should be) was the author who submitted a manuscript for a journal I edited to a former editor who forwarded the manuscript on to me for disposition. That former editor hadn't been editor for six years, and was not even the editor immediately prior to me!

The primary things to think about when targeting journals include: (a) *chances for success* (a function of the value of the work as against the journal's rejection rate); (b) the *journal's visibility* (subscription base, and whether the regular readership is homogeneous and includes the scholars you want to impact) and credibility (sometimes a function of whether the journal is sponsored by a recognized professional organization); and (c) *publication lag times* (a combination of review lags and production lags due to backlogs of copy).

Don't forget lag times as a consideration. All of us have our own horror stories. One manuscript I submitted required two years from initial submission through to the decision to accept the revised manuscript (one revision only), and another 18 months after acceptance till the manuscript appeared in print (This lag business is why it's helpful to build a network with people you respect who'll share preprints with you, if you want to stay current with the literature).

These are personal decisions. Some people only want to publish in the most respected journals. Some people think the quality of the piece overrides issues involving the quality of the journal; these folks believe that an important article will be recognized no matter what journal publishes the work. Junior faculty are sometimes most interested simply in getting into print. Like the instructions on many attitude measures say, there are no right or wrong answers.

3. Query Letters Are Usually of Limited Value

Sometimes people just getting started want to know if writing query letters prior to initial submission can prevent wasting everybody's time by avoiding submissions where there's a bad fit. In my opinion writing query letters prior to submission is a waste of time (the only exception involves journals that publish theme issues, since you can find out themes not yet announced or find out if an issue on a given theme is already full). If you read author guidelines you'll have a notion of whether your coverage is in the general mainstream of a given journal, so a query won't help resolve submission quandaries at this level. And queries don't help at a more specific level because the editor will tend to be evasive until a manuscript is actually in hand. The editor will always encourage submission if the manuscript is remotely a possible fit, so as not to miss any prize-winning manuscripts. And, on the other end of the continuum, the editor is not going to enthusiastically endorse an unseen product. Since the editor won't say no and won't say yes, query letters usually result in your being about as uncertain what to do after you get your response as you were before you queried the editor.

4. Attend to Details

The last thing authors do before submission usually is to check that all cited sources are in the references, and that all sources in the references are also cited in narrative. But since it's the last thing done, quite often tired authors only do a cursory job of checking (just like very tired doctoral students can do a cursory job writing their dissertation abstracts, when these

are the last things written). In fact, in my experience as a journal editor about 40% of the manuscripts I received had missing citations, extra citations, or used different years for the same source in different locations. This kind of thing isn't the end of the world, but it can create a bad impression and is simply sloppy. It can also slow down the production process for manuscripts that are ultimately accepted, thus leading to additional lag time.

5. Believe the Editor...

One thing that folks getting started sometimes want to know about is the art of interpreting editors' letters. To me this isn't art. The presumption by some is that editors aren't clear or communicate primarily through implication or innuendo. But in my experience most editors are very forthright. You can pretty much take most editors at their word, because editors tend to tell the truth as they see it. If an editor says revision and resubmission is encouraged, that means the editor thinks your manuscript is in the ballpark or at least deserves a serious shot. Editors don't lie about these things; they don't usually jerk people around by asking for revision when they really think there's no chance of a favorable outcome.

Editors have no incentive to torture authors by requesting revision when it's hopeless, and doing so would just make more work for them by keeping more manuscripts out for review. If an editor thinks that the manuscript doesn't fit the journal or isn't suitable, the editor will say so. If the editor doesn't say it's hopeless, it's not.

However, editors may tend to understate (rather than overstate) their reactions, since they thereby avoid overpromising that results in hurt feelings, so you can expect an outcome at least as favorable as the editor indicates is expected. A request for revision at the very least means that a revision will be seriously considered (very few manuscripts are accepted outright). Requests for revision with very specific directions or suggestions should be taken especially seriously.

...Except About Turn-Around Times

The one thing that editors (or at least some) will lie about is lag times for manuscript review. Some editors try to tell the truth, but often it's more accurate to double or triple these estimates. Some people learning about the publication process want to know about follow-up with editors who haven't met deadlines. For example, some authors write or call an editor virtually on the day when the announced turn-around time for review has lapsed.

In my own work, I don't call editors very often. And I wait one to two months after announced return dates prior to writing a follow-up note (however, I do religiously follow-up at that point, because I have experienced correspondence getting lost in the mail or editors loosing track of manuscripts in the shuffle). I write these on copies of the original acknowledgement-of-receipt correspondence, which is usually dated and has the file number on it, if the journal assigns them. But follow-ups usually don't speed things up, since editors often try to bring manuscript decisions to closure in roughly a manuscript submission-date order.

Most editors try to be fair, and think this is part of a reasonable operational definition of fairness.

6. Don't Overpersonalize Editorial Contacts

Some authors think it's great to have as much contact with an editor as possible, and try to personally befriend the editor. These authors like to call about everything, from initial queries to weekly follow-ups to sharing of their local weather information. The premise is that the editor will remember the contact and evaluate the manuscript more favorably as a result. I don't think these strategies have much positive effect. Most editors are patient about these sorts of efforts, but if anything too many personal contact efforts might have negative results.

7. Focus on the Revision Requests of the Editor

When editors request revisions they will usually provide copies of reviewers comments as well as their own thoughts. Editors do not put equal emphasis on all comments or on all reviews.

Editors rely for blind review on a combination of members of an editorial board and guest ad hoc reviewers. After working with given reviewers for a length of time, editors come to know which reviewers are most insightful and knowledgeable. One reviewer I had as a member of an editorial board always returned reviews that were several single-spaced pages in length. Some of the reviews were as thorough and as detailed as the manuscripts themselves!

But the editor simply can not send all manuscripts to a small cadre of reviewers, or these people would stop doing reviews. And

editors also use invited reviews as a way to get to know the potential contributions of other people as reviewers. In fact, asking to serve as an ad hoc guest reviewer is an excellent way for less experienced scholars to learn more about the editorial process.

Given these dynamics, if the editor enumerates a specific list of requested changes, this is the list of changes to which the most attention should be paid. The editor simply may not agree that all reviewer comments are valid.

Remember that the editor has full discretion over manuscript disposition. The reviews are totally advisory to the editor, notwithstanding the fact that most editors take the reviews very seriously. For example, I recently had a manuscript rejected even though both reviews were very favorable--the editor simply said he didn't agree. Pay more attention to what the editor says than to what the reviewers say.

8. Enumerate Revisions,

Justify Not Making Revisions You Find Unacceptable

When you submit your revision, it's usually helpful to enumerate the requested changes and exactly how you dealt with each one ("On p. 3 I did this..." etc.). Most of my correspondence with editors is extremely terse ("Here's a manuscript titled... Three copies are enclosed"), but the submission of a revision is an exception. Give the editor the (correct) impression that you've thought very carefully about requested changes and have been responsive.

But you don't have to be responsive via changes in every single area where revisions were requested. Some younger scholars feel they must placate the editor and the reviewers in every way possible, and that if they decline to make any of the requested changes the manuscript will be rejected. In point of fact it's sometimes OK to decline to make a particular change. If you decide to do so, say so, and clearly present your case as to why the change is inappropriate.

It is not in the best interest of the journal, the editor, or the author for inappropriate revisions to be made. So most editors will not be offended by your declining to make an inappropriate change. This option shouldn't be used with great regularity, but sometimes it's necessary. The editor should not evaluate whether the editor exactly agrees with author decisions, but only whether the choice is reasonable and is well defended. If what you feel is a seriously inappropriate change is requested, tell the editor you decline to make the change and tell the editor why the change would damage the work and everybody associated with it (the journal, the editor and you).

9. Don't Use Galley Proofs to Revise

At almost all journals authors receive galley proofs of copy to correct prior to final typesetting. This is to correct typesetting errors or to update in-press references that are now in print, and is not intended to be another chance for changes (even fairly minor ones) in the manuscript. Needed changes should have been made earlier in the process. This is one reason why having

spent considerable time earlier on getting the manuscript in the best possible shape pays off.

10. Promote Your Published Work

Once a manuscript is in print many authors assume their job is done. They assume that the most nationally prominent scholars (or perhaps their graduate students) are lurking in their mailrooms waiting for the definitive work to finally hit the streets. In fact, all too often very good work is overlooked even once it is in print. Everybody is busy, and not all scholars spend as much time reading or doing bibliographic searches as they should.

This means that you probably should spend some time publicizing your work even once it is in print. Many journals offer article reprints to authors at fairly low cost. If you can afford them, buy them. Send out copies to people around the country. It is especially good to send copies of your work to the people you've cited--these people are ego-maniacs like all the rest of us, will be flattered to see they're cited, and may even read the article as a result. People you have established a network with will appreciate this sharing, and may respond in kind.

When I send things to people I don't know, I have sometimes found it useful to use a humorous cover letter to get their interest. In fact, on one occasion an individual to whom I sent a manuscript along with a humorous letter was also a journal editor, and she thought the cover letter was clever enough that she published the letter itself in a subsequent issue of her journal.

Summary

Learning to write for publication can be an exciting though at times a humbling experience. It helps to remember that, believe it or not, even the most respected authors occasionally have some of their work rejected. And it helps to remember that most people become increasingly successful as they acquire more experience. Some of the references noted below elucidate some of the various points made here, and provide other suggestions as well.

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